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Planners held a pretty fair freeway meeting

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This week's Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee meeting came with a warning for the guest speaker: It might get ugly here.

The Monday night meeting brought out the usual few dozen residents, some well known to the committee for their activism. It also brought a couple of politicians because of the agenda.

State Sen. John Huppenthal and Phoenix City Councilman Greg Stanton came to hear what Matt Burdick of the Arizona Department of Transportation would say about the proposed South Mountain Freeway.

Last month, committee member Van Braswell asked to bring in ADOT to discuss design issues for the freeway, should it come to reality. Burdick's presentation was the main item on a short agenda, but it's an item highly charged with emotion.

Planning Committee member Max Masel thanked Burdick for coming, acknowledging, "It might get ugly here."

To the credit of everyone, it did not get ugly, although it's clear that some residents are frustrated with the lack of satisfying answers.

While Burdick brought a slide show of the parks Gilbert built in drainage basins along its stretch of freeway, Ahwatukee folks in the room didn't really want to think about niceties.

William Ramsay expressed dismay that the committee is negotiating with ADOT.

"I consider it insulting to consider amenities like a bike path," Ramsay said.

Melanie Pai told the committee she has concerns about schoolchildren who will be "breathing garbage" if the freeway is built. Pai pressed Burdick for "tangible criteria" that would demonstrate that the freeway is a bad idea for the community.

Ramsay and Pai are understandably on edge these days. A proposed freeway that they've been fighting creeps ever closer to reality, and they probably feel powerless to stop it.

The desire for straight, simple answers is something anyone can understand. Alas, when dealing with a state agency, simple answers aren't in the playbook.

Planning and building a freeway is a multi-agency, many-years process. The feds are involved because all their rules must be followed.

The county's involved because it's the voter-authorized part of the funding. It falls to the Arizona Department of Transportation - usually in the persona of Matt Burdick - to face the public, take questions and disburse whatever information has been cobbled together.

With a freeway, that information often is not what people want to hear.

Burdick deserves respect from the community for the work he's doing. I'm glad the residents of Ahwatukee, despite their emotional investment in the fight, did not resort to getting ugly. The people of Ahwatukee are better than that.

Patricia Biggs is an editorial writer for *The Ahwatukee Republic*.

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